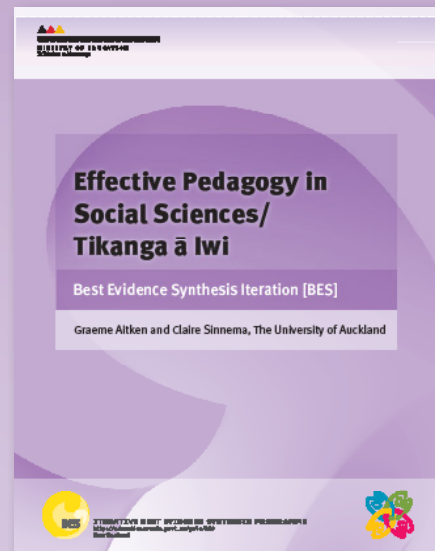# Create educationally powerful connections with learners' cultures

This is one of a series of cases that illustrate the findings of the best evidence syntheses (BESs). Each is designed to support the professional learning of educators, leaders and policy makers.

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

Effective Pedagogy in Social Sciences/ Tikanga ā Iwi

Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration [BES]

Graeme Aitken and Claire Sinnema, The University of Auckland

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Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga

BES cases: Insight into what works

The best evidence syntheses (BESs) bring together research evidence about 'what works' for diverse (all) learners in education. Recent BESs each include a number of cases that describe actual examples of professional practice and then analyse the findings. These cases support educators to grasp the big ideas behind effective practice at the same time as they provide vivid insight into their application.

Building as they do on the work of researchers and educators, the cases are trustworthy resources for professional learning.

Using the BES cases

The BES cases overview provides a brief introduction to each of the cases. It is designed to help you quickly decide which case or cases could be helpful in terms of your particular improvement priorities.

Use the cases with colleagues as catalysts for reflecting on your own professional practice and as starting points for delving into other sources of information, including related sections of the BESs. To request copies of the source studies, use the Research Behind the BES link on the BES website.

The conditions for effective professional learning are described in the Teacher Professional Learning and development BES and condensed into the ten principles found in the associated International Academy of Education summary (Timperley, 2008).

Note that, for the purpose of this series, the cases have been re-titled to more accurately signal their potential usefulness.

Responsiveness to diverse (all) learners

Use the BES cases and the appropriate curriculum documents to design a response that will improve student outcomes
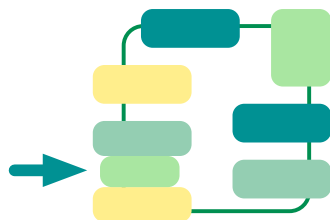
The different BESs consistently find that any educational improvement initiative needs to be responsive to the diverse learners in the specific context. Use the inquiry and knowledge-building cycle tool to design a collaborative approach to improvement that is genuinely responsive to your learners

Create educationally powerful connections with learners' cultures

This case illustrates how teachers can use practical strategies to encourage their students to draw on family and community knowledge and, in this way, accelerate their achievement.

The case explains how an intervention doubled the achievement levels of senior secondary Pasifika learners from low socio-economic status families. Before the intervention, the focus students had a history of limited achievement. By the end of the year, they were gaining senior secondary qualifications.

While the context is year 12, the case has relevance for any teacher or school looking to create educationally powerful connections with learners' cultures, families, and communities.

2 Making links between cultures: ancient Roman and contemporary Sāmoan

Source

McNeight, C. (1998). *"Wow! These sorts of things are similar to our culture!" Becoming culturally inclusive within the senior secondary school curriculum.* Unpublished graduate research report, Department of Teacher Education, Victoria University of Wellington.

Targeted learning outcome/s

This classroom programme was designed to address, for a group of Sāmoan girls, their sense of being culturally excluded by curriculum content and classroom processes, and to increase their engagement with learning. The particular curriculum focus was **conceptual understandings** about the religious practices of ancient Rome and the impact of Christianity on those practices.
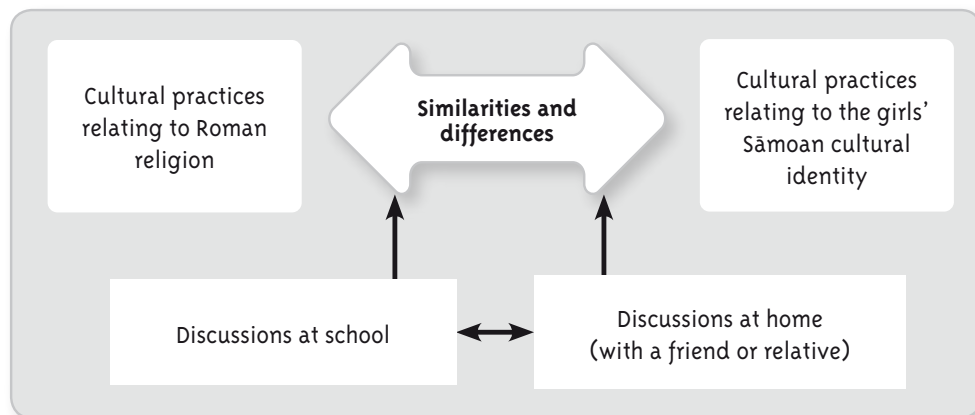
Learner/s and learning context

Four 17- to 18-year-old Sāmoan girls from low socio-economic status families had a history of limited engagement with school and limited academic achievement. While generally attentive, they were "cautious and tentative" when responding to questions in class. They had close and strong connections to their Sāmoan community and deep commitment to their religious and cultural values. The intervention described in this case was introduced during a unit on Roman Religion and *The Aeneid*, part of the classical studies programme.

Pedagogy

The teacher used two key strategies. First, she demonstrated how the students could engage in purposeful discussions about classroom learning with a significant other (for example, a mother, sister, or friend) from their own culture. The discussion was to be purposeful by involving an active search for similarities and differences between classical Roman and contemporary Sāmoan culture. No attempt was made to identify these similarities and differences at school; this was left for the home discussions, where the students could draw on cultural knowledge as well as school learning. These discussions highlighted, for example, similarities in the nature and purpose of artefacts, gender roles, religious rituals and beliefs, relationships, social occasions, communications, and history.
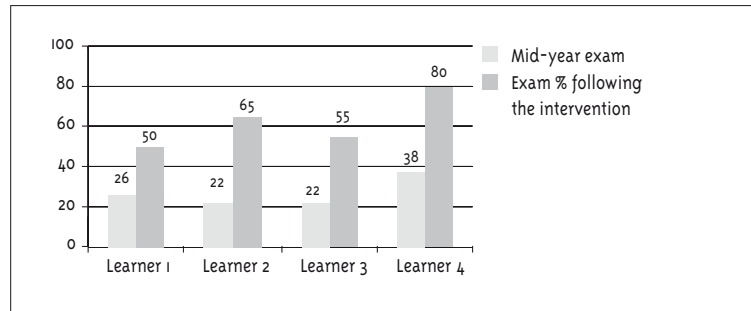
Second, the teacher set up one-on-one discussions and small, teacher-directed focus groups where the similarities and differences that had been identified at home could be recalled at school and their meaning reflected on and elaborated.

Cultural practices relating to Roman religion — **Similarities and differences** → Cultural practices relating to the girls' Sāmoan cultural identity

Discussions at school ↔ Discussions at home (with a friend or relative)

Outcomes

Comments from the girls showed that the intervention heightened their sense of inclusion and that they found it empowering to discover how their own experiences connected with the content of their learning.

A comparison of pre- and post-test evidence revealed that the girls' conceptual understanding was significantly greater than before. In the mid-year exam before the intervention, the four girls achieved marks of 22, 22, 26, and 38 percent. Both exam and intervention were assessed by the same teacher, required similar writing skills, and involved comparable content (in terms of conceptual understandings). The girls' marks in the exam that followed the intervention were more than double what they were at mid-year.

Bar chart: Mid-year exam vs Exam % following the intervention
- Learner 1: 26, 50
- Learner 2: 22, 65
- Learner 3: 22, 55
- Learner 4: 38, 80

How the learning occurred		
	Connection *Make connections to students' lives*	The teacher made the girls' own lives and cultural experiences a point of reference for their learning about an unfamiliar historical and cultural context. By embedding the girls' cultural knowledge in their learning, this approach provided cultural continuity. The information that the girls gained from their discussions at home and brought back to school was new to the teacher. By identifying similarities and differences, the students were able to draw parallels between the distal context and their own experience. This metacognitive strategy has been found to be a powerful learning tool (Mazarno et al., 2001), and it explains, in part, the shifts in outcomes for these learners.
	Interest *Design experiences that interest students*	The home discussions were set up in such a way that the girls could attend to the aspects of ancient Roman and contemporary Sāmoan culture that most interested them. This meant that there was far more discussion about religious beliefs and rituals than about any of the other aspects: artefacts, gender roles, relationships, social occasions, communications, and history. The students were directly involved in a range of discussion activities, both in and out of school. The varied activities and contexts helped them recall the content that was embedded in the discussions.
	Alignment *Align experiences to important outcomes*	By discussing her learning and the links between ancient Roman and contemporary Sāmoan cultures with her mother, not only did Miʻi become much more involved with course content, but also she and her mother were empowered by the experience. Mary and Charlotte, who described their home discussions as "rehearsals" for their discussions at school, also reported that those home discussions had helped them clarify their ideas. The combination of home and school discussions provided a variety of learning opportunities, all explicitly aligned to the teaching purpose.
	Community *Build and sustain a learning community*	It was identified as significant that links were made in one-on-one discussions with the teacher or in focus groups involving all four girls. These discussions were opportunities for the girls "to explore, to refine and develop or reject ideas in a natural conversational environment away from an evaluative classroom climate" (Mazarno et al., 2001). That the students also asked the teacher about her cultural background in relation to the ideas being explored demonstrates the shared nature of the knowledge building. The teacher–student relationship was conducive to learning: the teacher modelled a connection to her own cultural experience, and she established small groups that offered a safe context for discussions. The importance of such strategies is reinforced by the Sāmoan learner in Silipa's study who said: *Man! Sometimes the teacher shares with us her own story about her family and where they spent Christmas or the weekend and stuff like that. It kinda makes you feel confident to share your own story and stuff. Cus, it's like saying your story aloud before writing it down. Doing this in a group is choice, better than saying it in front of the whole class. The teacher is just choice* (Ata, year 11).

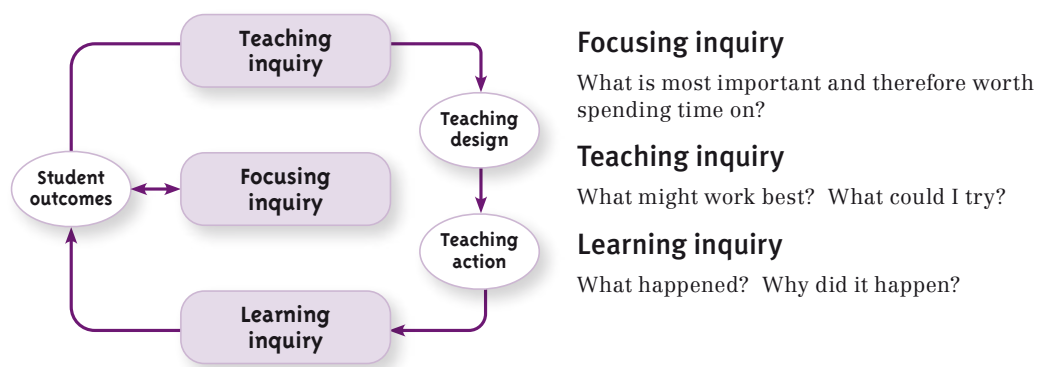*Cases*

Implications for pedagogy	This evidence demonstrates that making connections to students' lives can have a significant impact on their learning, even when the topics or contexts are distant in time and/or place. Metacognitive strategies, such as the similarities–differences strategy used here, can be effective. The gains may not be only in conceptual understanding, but also in learners' sense of inclusion. While connections can be reinforced at school, they can also be strengthened through involvement and dialogue with the learner's family and community.
Supporting evidence	For evidence relating to the impact of the similarities–differences strategy, see Marzano, R., Pickering, D., & Pollock, J. (2001). *Classroom instruction that works: Research-based strategies for increasing student achievment.* Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. Silipa, S. R. (2004). *Nurturing coolness and dignity in Sāmoan students' secondary school learning in Aotearoa/New Zealand.* Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Canterbury, Christchurch
Inquiry	The evidence presented in this case can be used to inform teachers' inquiries into their own practice.

Focusing inquiry

What is most important and therefore worth spending time on?

Teaching inquiry

What might work best? What could I try?

Learning inquiry

What happened? Why did it happen?

Suggested questions:

- How could you avoid promoting binary ('them and us' or 'us and other') thinking when using a similarities–differences metacognitive strategy? How could you ensure that the goals advanced by this approach are aligned to, not contrary to, curriculum goals?
- For which students or groups of students have you provided the greatest (and least) opportunity to connect learning to their cultural backgrounds and experience?
- How might you structure an activity so that students from diverse cultural backgrounds have opportunities to connect new learning to their own prior experience?
- To what extent has your teaching approach promoted opportunities for students to learn through dialogue with their peers, families, and others?
- Has your teaching emphasised the skills required for quality dialogue? What impact has your modelling / questioning / use of statements had on learning?